

REPORT

NATIONAL CONFERENCE

AD HOC COMMITTEE MEETING

MOBILITY INSTRUCTION

FOR THE BLIND

Washington, D. C.

April 18-20, 1966

Sponsored by the School of Rehabilitation Counseling,
Richmond Professional Institute in cooperation
with the Vocational Rehabilitation Administration

This seminar was made possible by Contract No. 66-47 from the Vocational Rehabilitation Administration, Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Washington, D. C.

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Presented by the School of Rehabilitation Counseling
at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse
with the Technical Assistance Administration

INTRODUCTION

An Ad Hoc Committee concerned with Mobility Instruction for the Blind met in Washington, D. C., April 18-20, 1966. The purposes of this meeting were to review and evaluate existing training programs for mobility instruction, explore ways to recruit and train more young people for the field of mobility instruction, and to make recommendations for future training programs in this area. The meeting was sponsored by the School of Rehabilitation Counseling, Richmond Professional Institute in cooperation with the Vocational Rehabilitation Administration.

All participants and committee members were persons, especially selected, who are knowledgeable about higher educational programs, mobility instruction, and the needs for such instruction. Among the participants were educators, State Vocational Rehabilitation Agency Directors, other agency administrators, residential school personnel, and members of the Vocational Rehabilitation Administration Central Office Staff.

Obviously, with such a small group of experts chosen for the conference, and their deep commitment to certain viewpoints, sharp differences of opinion were expected—and these differences were evident throughout the meeting. If there had been complete unanimity, the meeting would have been unnecessary.

I. The size and scope of the problem

The Commissioner of the Vocational Rehabilitation Administration, Miss Mary E. Switzer, presented a series of challenges to the committee in her welcoming address. She stated that most of the problems confronting rehabilitation today were problems of plenty—money has already been appropriated, research has progressed to where it can be of great value in the provision of services, and we have levels and standards of education that we have never had before.

Miss Switzer identified the major problem as “getting the largest number, the most talented, and the best trained mobility instructors in the shortest period of time”. She stated that this is an immediate need—that we must not wait five or ten years to serve people who need help now. Miss Switzer urged greater use of new resources, scientific research and technology, as well as more effective use of our present knowledges and skills to insure that each blind person in need of mobility instruction is trained to get about as efficiently and safely as possible. Self-sufficiency is a goal of rehabilitation, concluded Miss Switzer, and our goal is to tap all the potentiality of all blind people.

Dr. Douglas C. MacFarland, Chief, Division of Services for the Blind, VRA, then described the phenomenal growth in the field of mobility. He spoke about employment opportunities available to

blind persons and the problems in finding enough blind people adequately mobile to fill these positions. Dr. MacFarland also spoke about employer-rehabilitation counselor relationships and the need for more effective communication as well as the need for the blind to assume their place in society through the help of mobility instruction.

The problem of expansion of present mobility instruction programs, and the addition of new programs, without reduction in quality was also discussed. Crash programs seem undesirable to many, and yet the need is now. Twice as many people are expected to be served in the next few years as compared to present day services. A large majority of blind persons are still immobile—and most of these are waiting for service. It is necessary that mobility instruction be made available to all blind persons who want and need it.

II. Present programs in mobility instruction

The formal presentations of committee participants during the first day of the meeting were concerned with descriptions and explanations of the present graduate programs, a proposal for undergraduate training, and a full discussion concerning the length of time and extensive field work training required for these programs.

Two conclusions seemed to emerge from this first day's sessions:

- 1) Although the group was not in entire agreement that the mobility instructor should be the product of a graduate school training program, the whole group showed considerable respect for the programs provided by Boston College and Western Michigan University.
- 2) One could not expect mass production of mobility instructors in less time even though the program was developed on an undergraduate level.

Much of the discussion centered on the type of training and education mobility instructors should have in order to do a good job of teaching mobility to the blind. This discussion included consideration of existing graduate, undergraduate, and short-term programs. Some questions put forth during these discussions were:

- 1) Does a person with a Master's Degree make a better mobility instructor?
- 2) Are mobility instructors being over-educated?
- 3) Will the Master's Degree graduate desire administrative work instead of helping the blind directly?

- 4) Is it possible on an undergraduate level to produce a good competent mobility instructor?

An interesting observation was made with respect to short-term training courses. Both Boston College and Western Michigan University had attempted several summer sessions for teachers working with blind children and certain agency personnel. Their statistics showed that out of approximately 50 trainees completing the courses, only 4 remained in the field as full-fledged instructors.

III. Employers of mobility instructors

The second-morning session dealt with mobility training from the viewpoint of employing agencies. The major emphases were on the shortage of personnel, large case-loads, and the high salaries that the trained instructors can now command because of the great shortage. There was little criticism of the graduate students—indeed, a plea was made for more of them.

While it was generally agreed that it would be a fine thing if individuals could be trained without all of the graduate courses—in cognizance of the personnel shortage—it was also agreed that it might take six to nine months to do the job, and the technicians so trained would lack much of the professional knowledge and skills which a number of the participants felt was important if the instructor wished to fully understand the behavior of his client, even though this was in the narrow context of the client's mobility needs.

IV. Mobility instruction for the partially sighted person

There was a great deal of interest and discussion elicited about the need for mobility instruction to the partially sighted client. There has been an awareness of this need for a long time, along with the recognition that this type of training would be greatly different from that given for the totally blind client. A number of approaches would have to be developed since there are hundreds of variables inherent in the use of partial sight, depending on etiology, diagnosis, prognosis, visual acuity, and field limitation.

There are many more people with serious visual impairments than there are totally blind persons. Diagnosis of the eye condition plays an important part in determining how best to serve the partially sighted person in a travel training program. In addition, since the mobility training of such a client should be geared toward utilization of his remaining vision to its greatest extent, a close liaison between low vision clinics and the mobility instructor is necessary. It was generally agreed that pilot courses should be developed to study

the best methods of training mobility instructors for the partially sighted in the shortest period of time.

V. Federal support for mobility training programs

Discussions of Federal support for mobility instruction included reports from representatives of the Vocational Rehabilitation Administration, the Office of Education, and the Veterans Administration.

Mr. John Jones, Coordinator, Unit of Education for the Visually Handicapped, Office of Education, indicated their interest in the problem and stated they are at present supporting a graduate program, to start September, 1966, at San Francisco State College. He also informed the committee of a pilot study program which would lead to a complete undergraduate course for mobility instructors at Florida State University. Both schools will devote their efforts to developing instructors for children in residential and day school systems.

Mr. Russel Williams, Chief, Blind Rehabilitation, Veterans Administration, informed the group of Veterans Administration plans to expand its mobility instruction program to a point where it will be employing approximately 50 additional instructors within a few years.

Miss Cecile Hillyer, Chief, Division of Training, Vocational Rehabilitation Administration, presented VRA's concern for support of training programs. She stated that the VRA training grants program is guided by certain operating principles. These principles are: (1) identification of need, (2) training program must have a direct relevance to the mission of the Vocational Rehabilitation Administration, (3) the training programs must cooperate with other agencies in the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, (4) evaluation—a continuing study of curriculum content and teaching methods—and validation of the results.

Miss Hillyer, in describing some of the VRA approaches toward solving the training and manpower shortages in rehabilitation counseling identified the following activities:

- 1) Increasing the number of graduate training programs.
- 2) Fostering development of cooperative work-study programs between State Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies and universities, so that some counselors may have short periods of study on campus, interspersed with periods of paid employment.
- 3) Encouraging the study and analysis of the rehabilitation counselor's job to identify tasks that do not require full pro-

fessional training—organizing them appropriately in a Counselor Aide job or other sub-professional position.

- 4) Urging State Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies to attempt to secure higher salaries and provide better working conditions to attract qualified personnel.
- 5) Advocating in-service training.
- 6) Encouraging pilot programs at the undergraduate level.

Miss Hillyer suggested that the field of mobility instruction needed experimentation with several different approaches and stated that "courage is needed to challenge tradition by attempting to evaluate both preparation and subsequent performance, but these things must be done to bring rehabilitation services to the blind persons who need them."

VI. Summary and recommendations

The final session of the conference, chaired by Dr. James F. Garrett, Assistant Commissioner for Research and Training, Vocational Rehabilitation Administration was designed for discussion and comments from the entire group, followed by development of guidelines and recommendations for future planning to meet the needs for mobility instruction. Recommendations proposed by the Committee were:

- 1) That the now existing graduate schools double their student enrollment during the next year if possible and that the Vocational Rehabilitation Administration continue to support these programs.
- 2) That the Vocational Rehabilitation Administration support other graduate programs and undergraduate programs if funds are available.
- 3) That the knowledge and skills of mobility instructors be determined and graduates of such programs be followed up to see if their training is being used to maximum potential—thus exploring better ways of utilizing personnel.
- 4) That studies be done of the actual mobility needs of blind and partially sighted persons.
- 5) That the physical standards of the mobility instructor be altered to read—"normal vision".
- 6) That the Vocational Rehabilitation Administration consider development of intensive programs for mobility instructors

without all the academic content now included in graduate training programs (a supplemental approach, not to take the place of established programs).

- 7) That the Vocational Rehabilitation Administration support a research study which would employ the principal techniques of systems analysis to determine the number of persons in need of mobility instruction, the different kinds of instruction which might be necessary, the competencies needed for such instruction, and various training techniques which could be employed.
- 8) That the Vocational Rehabilitation Administration give careful study to the possibility of developing travel instructions for the partially sighted and of initiating pilot courses as soon as practicable. No recommendations were made as to whether these courses should be university sponsored or at the technician level. There was serious concern expressed, however, that the program be studied carefully and that the course content take into consideration all of the many variables concerning work needs and services to the partially sighted.
- 9) That a program of apprenticeships be developed by the Vocational Rehabilitation Administration to assure that high quality and interested recruits were provided for the expanded universities' training programs; e.g., qualified mobility instructors could accept two or three individuals part-time during the summer to acquaint them with the mobility program, to determine their interests, and to engender enthusiasm where this interest was manifest.

AD HOC COMMITTEE MEETING – MOBILITY TRAINING

Participants

MISS GEORGIA LEE ABEL

Department of Special Education
School of Education
San Francisco State College
1600 Holloway Avenue
San Francisco, California 94132

DR. JOHN R. EICHORN

Program Coordinator
Department of Education
Mobility Instruction of the Blind
Boston College
Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts 02167

MR. LOYAL E. APPLE

Chief, Blind Rehabilitation Center
Veterans Administration Hospital
Hines, Illinois 60141

DR. JAMES B. ENOCHS

Dean of Educational Services
and Summer Session
Sonoma State College
Rohnert Park, California 94928

MR. RALPH E. BEISTLINE

Consultant in Rehabilitation
Office for the Blind
Department of Public Welfare
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania 17120

MR. HOWARD H. HANSON

Director, Service to the Blind
and Visually Handicapped
804 North Euclid
Pierre, South Dakota 57501

MR. LAWRENCE E. BLAHA

Department of Special Education
California State College
5151 State College Drive
Los Angeles, California 90032

MR. V. S. HARSHBARGER

Chief, Bureau for the Blind
Division of Welfare
State Office Building
Jefferson City, Missouri 65102

MR. DONALD BLASCH

Program Director
School of Graduate Studies
Mobility Instructor of the Blind
and Home Teacher Program
Western Michigan University
Kalamazoo, Michigan 49001

DR. RICHARD E. HOOVER

Chief of Ophthalmology
Greater Baltimore Medical Center
Baltimore, Maryland 21201

REV. THOMAS J. CARROLL

Director, Catholic Guild for All
the Blind
770 Centre Street
Newton, Massachusetts 02158

DR. DOUGLAS E. INKSTER

Director, Illinois Visually
Handicapped Institute
1151 South Wood Street
Chicago, Illinois 60612

MR. G. WILLIAM DEBETAZ

Vice President, The Seeing Eye, Inc.
Morristown, New Jersey 07960

MR. GEORGE W. KELLER

Assistant Supervisor in Charge
of Services for the Blind
2100 Guilford Avenue
Baltimore, Maryland 21218

MR. RODNEY KOSSICK

Supervisor
Program for the Blind
and Partially Seeing
Division of Rehabilitation
1418 Rosser
Bismarck, North Dakota 58501

MR. IRVING J. KRUGER

Supervisor
Commission for the Blind
1100 Raymond Boulevard
Newark, New Jersey 07102

MR. ROY F. KUMPE

Executive Director
Arkansas Enterprises for the Blind
2811 Fair Park Boulevard
Little Rock, Arkansas 72204

DR. BERTHOLD LOWENFELD

Research Professor
San Francisco State College

MR. CARL F. McCOY

Director, Rehab. Center for the Blind
Florida Council for the Blind
Daytona Beach, Florida

MR. EDWARD H. McDONALD

Peripatologist
Rhode Island Association for Blind
39 Arcade Building
Providence 3, Rhode Island

DR. GEORGE G. MALLINSON

Dean, School of Graduate Studies
Department of Education
Western Michigan University
Kalamazoo, Michigan 49001

MR. DAVID R. MENDELSON

Chief, Division of Rehabilitation
of the Blind
Department of Rehabilitation
1500 Fifth Street - Room 340
Sacramento, California 95814

MR. HAROLD RICHTERMAN

Director of Rehabilitation
Industrial Home for the Blind
57 Willoughby Street
Brooklyn, New York 11201

MR. HAROLD G. ROBERTS

Director, Program Planning
American Foundation for the Blind
New York, N. Y. 10011

DR. GERALDINE T. SCHOLL

Associate Professor
University of Michigan
Department of Special Education
Ann Arbor, Michigan 48104

MR. STANLEY SUTERKO

Instructor, Mobility & Orientation
Western Michigan University
Kalamazoo, Michigan 49001

**VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION
ADMINISTRATION**

MR. WARREN BLEDSOE

Assistant Chief
Division of Services for Blind

DR. JAMES F. GARRETT

Assistant Commissioner
Research and Training

MR. RICHARD E. HARDY

Division of Services for Blind

MISS CECILE HILLYER

Chief, Division of Training

MR. JOSEPH V. HUNT

Assistant Commissioner
Program Operations

DR. DOUGLAS MacFARLAND

Chief, Division of Services
for the Blind

MR. GEORGE MAGERS

Division of Services for the Blind

MISS MARGARET M. RYAN

Assistant Chief, Division of
Training

OFFICE OF EDUCATION

MR. JOHN W. JONES

Programs for Special Need Branch
Handicapped Children & Youth
Section

DR. TONY C. MILAZZO

Director, Programs for Special
Need Branch
Division of Educational Personnel
Training

VETERANS ADMINISTRATION

MR. RUSSELL WILLIAMS

Chief, Blind Rehabilitation

**RICHMOND PROFESSIONAL
INSTITUTE**

WADE O. STALNAKER, Ph. D.

Director, School of
Rehabilitation Counseling

KEITH C. WRIGHT

Professor
School of Rehabilitation
Counseling

THOMAS KING WHITE

Assistant Professor
School of Rehabilitation
Counseling



